

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

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C O N F I D E N T I A L

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE VIENTIANE 7367

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, LA

SUBJECT: FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN LAOS

1. THE PRINCIPLE OF A FREE PRESS RECEIVED A BOOST LAST WEEK AS BOTH THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION STAFF AND THE LAO PRESS CLUB UPHELD THE RIGHT OF NEWS MEDIA TO COVER THE EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS BETWEEN THE PATHET LAO AND THE VIENTIANE SIDE ON THE PLAIN OF JARS SEPTEMBER 19.

2. A COMMITMENT TO PROVIDE TRANSPORTATION FOR JOURNALISTS TO THE EXCHANGE SITE WAS CONFIRMED BY THE JCCIA (JOINT CENTRAL COMMISSION TO IMPLEMENT THE ACCORDS) AT THE SAME TIME AS THE EXCHANGE WAS ANNOUNCED. HOWEVER, THE LIST INITIALLY APPROVED BY THE PATHET LAO INCLUDED ONLY TEN FOREIGN AND SEVEN LOCAL JOURNALISTS, ALL CLEARLY SELECTED BY POLITICAL TINT. THE LIST SPECIFICALLY EXCLUDED TWO LOCAL NEWSPAPERS WHICH OFTEN RUN ANTI-PATHET EDITORIALS, AND INCLUDED BY NAME ONLY FOREIGN JOURNALISTS WHO WERE CONSIDERED FAVORABLE TO PL.

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3. THIS MANIPULATION OF THE PRESS LIST RECALLED INCIDENTS

EARLIER THIS YEAR AT THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, WHICH IS HEADED BY A PATHET LAO, WHEN THE STAFF COMPLAINED OF ATTEMPTS TO MUZZLE THEM. IT ALSO RECALLED THE "PROVISIONAL REGULATIONS ON PROTECTING THE DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS OF THE LAO PEOPLE," APPROVED LAST MAY BY THE NATIONAL POLITICAL COUNCIL, HEADED BY PRINCE SOUPHANOUVONG. LOCAL JOURNALISTS AND STAFF AT THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION SAW CHAPTER SIX OF THIS CONTROVERSIAL DOCUMENT AS A THREAT TO A FREE PRESS.

4. WITH THE URGING OF FOREIGN NEWSMEN, MINISTRY OFFICIALS WORKED ASSIDUOUSLY TO CONVINCE THE PATHET TO ENLARGE THE LIST. THE MINISTRY'S DIRECTOR-GENERAL WROTE A LETTER TO THE PATHET LAO SIDE OF THE JCCIA AND MADE PERSONAL APPEALS. HE ARGUED THAT THE PRISONER EXCHANGE WAS NOT MERELY A PATHET LAO PROPAGANDA SHOW, BUT WAS A PART OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PEACE ACCORDS AND PROTOCOL AND SHOULD BE WITNESSED BY THE WHOLE WORLD.

5. MEANWHILE, ON SEPTEMBER 13, THE LAO PRESS CLUB HELD A SPECIAL MEETING AND DREW UP A STATEMENT CONDEMNING THE PRESS LIMITATIONS AS VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, AND AS A PARTISAN ACTION DURING A PERIOD OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION. IF ANY REPORTER WAS EXCLUDED, NO MEMBER OF THE CLUB - WHICH INCLUDES VIRTUALLY EVERY LAO JOURNALIST - WOULD GO TO THE EXCHANGE POINT. THE CLUB ALSO DISCUSSED A POSSIBLE REPORT TO THE WORLD PRESS INSTITUTE. THE CLUB STATEMENT APPEARED MONDAY ON THE FRONT PAGE OF ALL FOUR DAILIES, INCLUDING THE PRO-PATHET LAO VIENTIANE POST.

6. THE EDITOR OF ONE EXCLUDED PAPER TRIED TO DEFUSE THE CONFRONTATION BY SAYING HE DIDN'T MIND IF THE OTHERS WENT, BECAUSE HE HAD HIS OWN NEWS SOURCES. BY THE DAY OF THE FLIGHT, IT WAS CLEAR THE BOYCOTT WOULD NOT BE TOTAL. THE FOREIGN PRESS HAD NEVER EVEN CONSIDERED RESPECTING IT.

7. AS THE C-123 LOADED UP FOR THE TRIP TO THE PLAIN OF JARS, MANY COMPROMISES WERE EVIDENT. THE FOREIGN LIST BALLOONED TO 19, INCLUDING ALL SHADES OF OPINION, AND THE LOCAL LIST TO NINE, BUT STILL EXCLUDING THE TWO ANTI-CONFIDENTIAL

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PATHET NEWSPAPERS. ALL LOCAL REPORTERS WHO HAD BEEN DESIGNATED SEATS USED THEM, BOYCOTT OR NO, AND AT LEAST ONE EXCLUDED PAPER SENT ITS CHIEF EDITORIAL WRITER TO COVER THE DEPARTURE. LATER, THIS PAPER BLANDLY USED MINISTRY OF INFORMATION RELEASES FOR ITS REPORT ON THE EXCHANGE.

8. ALTHOUGH NO BOYCOTT OCCURRED AND A CLEAR-CUT CON-

FRONTATION WAS AVOIDED, BOTH LOCAL PRESS AND THE MINISTRY
OF INFORMATION FORCED THE PATHET LAO TO BACK DOWN AND
DEMONSTRATED THAT A FREE PRESS IS STILL A HEALTHY
REALITY IN LAOS.
WHITEHOUSE

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